Tinned food — the first two hundred years

The engineer Bryan Donkin (1768-1855), founder of the world's first commercial canned food company.

Got a refrigerator in your house or apartment? Of course you have, but supposing there was no such thing as refrigeration, what would you have used then?

The gourmet chefs of the ancient world flavoured their foods with spices, and most of all salt. Okay, salt is great in small quantities, but if you wanted to preserve a side of bacon or perhaps a whole cow throughout the Summer months, you didn't have much choice. Then someone had the bright idea of putting food in cans and sealing them.

Canning appears to have been tried for the first time towards the end of the 18th Century; it was the brainchild of the chef Nicolas Appert (1749-1841). Developing the process took him many years, but in 1810 he was awarded a prize of 10,000 francs. It didn't take long for the idea to cross the Channel, and by 1813 the first factory mass producing canned foods was established in London by the engineer Bryan Donkin.

The rest, as they say, is history, but the technology has changed enormously in those two hundred years. Cans were originally sealed by hand; a good craftsman could seal maybe six an hour. The BBC has recently produced a short video that demonstrates how this was done. According to the Heinz company, a staggering 1.5 million cans of their baked

beans are sold in the UK every day, so without automation...hmm. There have also been other innovations, like the ring pull can, a massive improvement that allows even a child to open a can quickly and safely.

Nicolas Appert and Bryan Donkin may not be in the same class genius-wise as Sir Isaac Newton, but Appert's invention and Donkin's innovation followed decades later by modern, automated mass production techniques mean these two men have literally fed the world, as a certain Mr Geldof might say. That is something for you to bear in mind next time you open a can of baked beans, empty its contents into a saucepan, and then casually discard the empty shell into your trash can.

A bust of Nicolas Appert (1749-1841), the Frenchman whose genius and dedication changed the way the world eats.

[The above article was first published April 23, 2013. The BBC video linked from the original article has now been removed but I have linked to the archived page here.]